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# Understanding Abusive Men

Traditionally, research and intervention in the area of wife abuse have focused primarily on the victims of the abuse, namely women and children. Recently, however, an increased awareness to approach the prevention of family violence from a more global perspective has resulted in a need to better understand and treat the abuser.

Because this awareness is still in its infancy, there is, as yet, only a very limited understanding of the abuser and the causes for the abuse. It is known that men's aggressive behavior toward their partners is not a product of our era but a continuity of sanctioned social codes that were originally manifested centuries ago. Historically, it was deemed right for husbands to discipline their wives. In fact, in ancient Egypt, men were expected to bash their wives' teeth out with bricks if they spoke out against them. Moreover, the medieval church sanctioned flogging of disobedient wives. In 18th century England, a

husband was allowed to punish his wife with a stick as long as it was no thicker than the width of his thumb. Hence, the famous saying "the rule of thumb." For centuries, society has believed it is the right and duty of men to control their families, including their wives. Wife battering continues today, in part because many people still hold this belief.

Sex role socialization and its reinforcement by society is one theory offered to explain wife abuse. From this perspective, abuse is viewed as a direct function of men's traditional role in society versus the inferior status attributed to women; a situation which leads to oppression of women by men. There is also a strong tendency in abusive men to perceive the expression of emotions as a typically feminine reaction and, therefore, unacceptable in their view as a valid means of resolving conflicts.

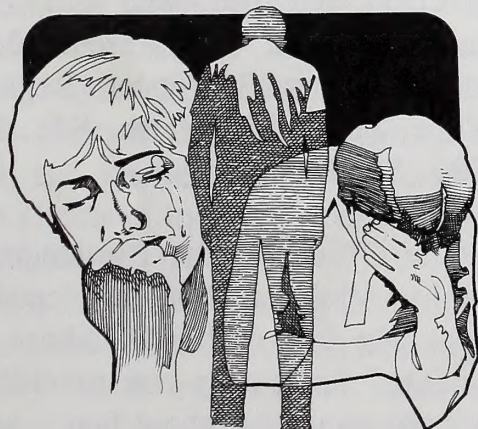
There are many other reasons being given in attempting to explain why some men abuse their wives or partners. The issue is very complex and subject to the interpretation of various groups of researchers and practitioners in that field. Psychiatrists, for example, have often associated the abuser's violent behavior with personality disorders such as sadism or paranoia and more recently with the psychopathological model which refers to the subject's loss of control.

There is an increasing body of literature documenting cases of

abusers who have either been abused themselves or witnessed abuse in their family of origin as children. This cycle is thought to be perpetuated in future generations such that individuals, victimized as children, may be, in adulthood, abusive parents or spouses. This is referred to as the social learning theory. It suggests that early childhood exposure to violence of any kind, including violence outside the home, might be a contributing factor in cases of men resorting to abusive means to resolve conflict. This perspective has broad implications for children's exposure to violence in the media particularly in comic books, rock videos, television and movies.

From an existential perspective, a man's abusive behavior is understood in light of his sense of self as it interacts with the perceived social environment. To illustrate, a man may abuse his wife when she does not cook the supper to his liking, interpreting this action as a demonstration of a lack of respect for him or a challenge to his authority. In this situation, the abuser uses violence as a means of exerting or regaining power that he feels he has lost. He has placed his own unique

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## Understanding Abusive Men

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meaning on his wife's actions. The meaning he makes is based on a complex mix of life experiences and learnings.

Finally, some experts believe that no one factor can account for abusive behavior in men. Rather, it is the combination of the historical, societal and individual factors as well as the immediate environment (work, family, friends) that interact and generate some men's violent behavior toward their partners.

What kinds of facts are being reported about abusive men? Some of the characteristics listed in the current literature include:

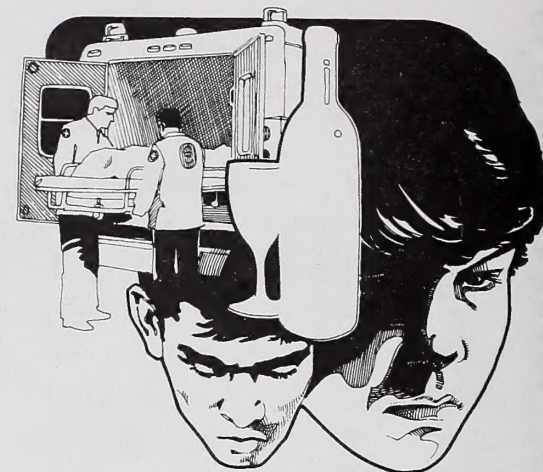
- low self-esteem
- emotional dependency
- strong denial mechanisms

- internalization of the traditional male role
- feelings of isolation
- extreme insecurity
- fear of intimacy
- strong need to control
- extreme possessiveness
- inability to express emotions; only anger
- inability to trust others
- inability to nurture others or express need
- "Jekyll & Hyde" type of personality
- history of childhood violence

It is also reported that abusers do not form an homogeneous group nor do they belong to the same age group, social background or economic status. For some, the onset of violence will be triggered by their partner's pregnancy and for others, when they consume

alcohol or even simply because the roast is overdone. It is, therefore, almost impossible to give an exact description of the abusive man.

As more men receive help through treatment programs, more will be learned about what contributes to their behavior and how such behavior can be both prevented and stopped.



## Did You Know?

• The Family Research Lab of the University of New Hampshire hosted the Third National Family Violence Research Conference, July 6 – 9, and the First National Family Violence Research Conference for Practitioners and policymakers, July 9 – 11 in Durham, New Hampshire. The conference was designed to present new research findings in the field and to promote dialogue and information sharing among researchers, practitioners and policymakers working in the area of family violence. The format of the conference was divided into three tracks covering the areas of child, elder and partner abuse and a variety of issues relating to legal and ethical research, treatment, prevention, program planning and evaluation were discussed. The conference was well attended with several participants attending from Canada. This conference is held only every three years and provides an invaluable opportunity for individuals working in the field to share new research findings among

their peers. Almost 200 research papers were presented at the conference, many of which will be available through the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence, upon request.

• The WINGS (Women in Need Growing Stronger) of Providence Society officially opened its second stage housing complex April 7 in Edmonton. This housing facility, the second one in Alberta, offers accommodation for up to six months to assaulted women and their children. In addition to the provision of a safe secure environment, the service offers support groups for mothers, teens and children, in-house counselling, information and referral services.

• The Vancouver Battered Women's Support services has recently published a discussion guide on violence in dating relationships. The 13 page document is designed to "provide teachers, youth workers and others with information and tools for

raising the issue in their work with young people." Single copies are available free of charge by contacting:

Battered Women's Support Services  
1666 West Broadway,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6J 1X6  
(604) 734-1574

• The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women released in June a report on wife battering in Canada. The report, entitled *Battered But Not Beaten: Preventing Wife Battering in Canada*, was researched and written by Linda MacLeod, who also wrote the 1980 report. Copies are available from the Council's Western Regional Office, 220 - 4th Avenue S.E., Box 1390, Stn. M, Calgary.

• The Office for the Prevention of Family Violence has developed a speaker's kit entitled "Abuse in Families" for use by communities to increase awareness about family violence. Call the Office for information.



# Community News

## Northeast

Construction has begun on a new, larger women's emergency shelter in Fort McMurray. The sod turning ceremony was held June 1 with occupation expected in the fall. The new building will provide much needed additional space. The shelter capacity will increase to 16 from its present 9 bed capacity.

\* \* \*

A group of agency representatives and interested individuals in Athabasca have established the Athabasca Prevention of Family Violence Society. The Society plans to focus initially on increasing awareness about family violence in the community.

## South

Since 1984, two therapists at Alberta Mental Health Services in Lethbridge have been facilitating an ongoing, open group known as the "Rotten Choice" Study Group. The group is made up of women who seem to go from one bad relationship to another with disastrous results for themselves and their children. The results may mean physical, emotional or sexual abuse, poverty, depression or even life threatening situations.

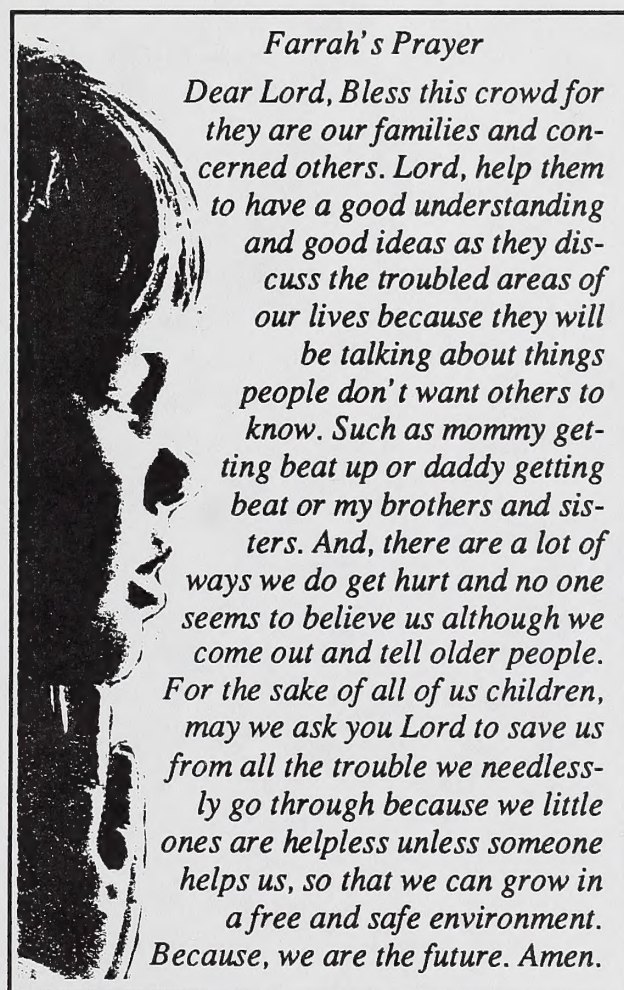
The weekly meetings provide a supportive setting for the women to explore the personal attributes which may make them vulnerable to becoming involved in bad relationships and may even contribute to them.

Some have discovered that loneliness, lack of finances, sexual needs and childhood conditioning have often made them desperate for love and attention from any source. The effects of low self esteem and the realization that they only felt worthwhile when meeting the needs of others have been important learnings.

For more information about the group contact Elizabeth Grintals or Jennifer Butterfield.

## Northwest

A public forum on family violence was held at Alexis Indian Reservation, July 8. The persons attending were told about their community's involvement in the Northwest Research Project, and listened to a variety of speakers talk about the dynamics of several types of family violence. Nine year old Farrah Kootenai opened the meeting with the following prayer:



### Farrah's Prayer

*Dear Lord, Bless this crowd for they are our families and concerned others. Lord, help them to have a good understanding and good ideas as they discuss the troubled areas of our lives because they will be talking about things people don't want others to know. Such as mommy getting beat up or daddy getting beat or my brothers and sisters. And, there are a lot of ways we do get hurt and no one seems to believe us although we come out and tell older people. For the sake of all of us children, may we ask you Lord to save us from all the trouble we needlessly go through because we little ones are helpless unless someone helps us, so that we can grow in a free and safe environment. Because, we are the future. Amen.*

## Calgary

A Support Centre for Battered Women opened in Calgary, July 1. The centre offers counselling two days a week and operates as a drop-in centre the remainder of the time. Separate support groups for abused women living with and without their partners are operated by the centre as well as a group for children from 7 to 12 years.

## Central

The residents of Ponoka will be focusing their attention on family violence during National Family Week, October 5 to 11. The Ponoka Community Care Liaison Committee is planning to involve the whole community in a variety of activities during the week. There will be displays, banner and poster contests for students, dinner theatre, balloons and stickers and an open forum for the community. The schools will use the family violence theme that week and the local media, radio, newspaper and television will cover all the activities as well as provide articles, interviews and short radio spots.

## Edmonton

Professionals and volunteers from the County and City of Leduc have been meeting regularly to inform and educate each other about issues related to family violence. The group, which was formed in 1985, is known as the Family Violence Interest Committee and its long term goal is to eventually raise the community's awareness on the subject of family violence.

\* \* \*

Recently, the City of Edmonton Social Services has established a support group for French women who are/were in abusive relationships.

Les services sociaux de la ville d'Edmonton ont récemment mis sur pied un group d'entraide pour les femmes francophones, victimes de violence conjugale.

Contact:

Marie-Helene Dunn  
Idylwylde Centre  
8314 - 88 Avenue  
Edmonton, T6C 1L1  
(403) 645-7839



## Calendar of Events

**September 18-19 Edmonton**  
Every Family is a Working Family:  
A Sharing of thoughts and ideas about  
Canadian families

Contact: Anne Mason

The Vanier Institute of  
the Family  
120 Holland Ave., 3rd Floor  
Ottawa  
(613) 722-4007

**September 19-21 London, Ontario**  
Family Violence:

A Native Perspective

Contact: CPA Section of  
Native Mental Health  
Box 89  
Shannonville, Ontario  
K0K 3A0  
(613) 966-7619

**October 7, 8, 9, 10 Calgary**  
3rd International Indian Child  
Conference

Contact: Lloyd Suttor  
or Allen Benson  
800 Highfield Place  
10010 - 106 Street  
Edmonton, T5J 3L8  
(403) 423-2141

**October 29, 30, 31 Edmonton**  
FCSSA Conference:  
Families, our Heritage our Future

Contact: Caterina Greco  
Alberta Culture &  
Multiculturalism  
2nd Floor,  
12431 Stony Plain Road  
Edmonton, T5N 3N3  
(403) 427-2927

**November 29, 30 Edmonton**  
Cross-cultural aspects of Mental  
Health

Contact: Anne Falk  
Mennonite Centre for  
Newcomers  
311, 10766 - 97 Street  
Edmonton, T5H 2M1  
(403) 424-7709

## Book Review

**Men who Batter: An Integrated  
Approach for Stopping Wife Abuse**

Edward W. Gondolf

Holmes Beach, Florida: Learning  
Publications Inc, 1985.

Treatment of the male batterer is a relatively new field and still very controversial. Gondolf discusses the controversy. He comments on the approaches being taken in the various types of treatment programs being offered and goes on to describe a particular approach to the problem.

The author acknowledges the lead taken by the feminist movement in bringing the issue of wife abuse to public attention. He also supports the feminist view that wife abuse is part of the general abuse to which women in western society are subject, along with rape, sexual harassment and pornography. He points out that *professionals are still only marginally involved in the movement against wife abuse and in general regard domestic violence more as a humanist issue and consider both men and women to be suffering from the violent relationship.*

The feminist view supports a social action approach, which would change society, while the humanist view favors a social service methodology which focuses on the individuals involved. Gondolf believes that a mediation of these conflicting viewpoints is plausible and he describes a treatment approach that combines elements of both viewpoints.

Before discussing the approach he is advocating, the author reviews various types of programs and comments on their relevance and effectiveness. He has organized them into a typology which includes mental health approaches, adjunct shelter programs and supervised self-help groups. The advantages and disadvantages of each type are discussed. Gondolf favors the

supervised self-help model. He says it is the most suitable and effective if one accepts the premise that men who batter have been *oversocialized into a traditional male role predicated on control* and that such men *exhibit more rigidity than outright aggressiveness or women hatred* (p. 52). In other words, *they are conforming to a stereotypic image of men as dominant.* This thesis is developed in some depth and then a program format that acknowledges and reflects these premises is advocated.

Gondolf concludes his book with a discussion on the need for additional programs which will help bring about social change. He examines the need for change in various societal institutions and ends with a plea for the development of a new image for men.

You may contact the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence at the following numbers: 427-7599 or 427-5961.

**"FOCUS: FAMILY  
VIOLENCE PREVENTION"** is a quarterly publication of the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence. Submissions for future issues, especially news about community activities, are welcome. To put your name on the mailing list for additional copies, contact the Office.

Address all correspondence to:  
The Office for the Prevention of  
Family Violence  
Alberta Social Services  
10030 - 107 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 3E4

**Alberta**

SOCIAL SERVICES  
AND COMMUNITY HEALTH